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AN EXPERIMENT IN THE TRAINING OF TEACHERS OF COMPOSITION FOR WORK WITH COLLEGE FRESHMEN¹

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At the very beginning it should be indicated that no attempt is to be made to cover the entire subject of the training of teachers of composition for college work, or even the smaller subject of the training of teachers of composition for work with college Freshmen. The sole purpose of this paper is to outline a single experiment which is being made in this direction. There are doubtless many other ways in which the end sought in this experiment could be attained; failure to mention other means implies no criticism of them, but merely a desire to keep to that which is being tried this year under the personal direction of the writer.

For some time the Department of English at Harvard has felt that the equipment of the men whom it has been sending forth to teach English has been inadequate on the side where beginners are most likely to be tested, namely, in their ability to teach elementary English composition. This inadequacy has been perceptible both in the very moderate skill displayed by most graduate students in writing theses and reports, and in the dismay with which even the best of them have approached the unfamiliar task of teaching Freshmen to write. With the idea of doing something to remedy these difficulties, the Department of English at Harvard has this year established a course officially described as follows:

English 67—English Composition. Practice in Writing, in the Criticism of Manuscript, and in Instruction by Conferences and Lectures. Discussion of the Principles of Composition and of the Organization and Management of Courses in English Composition.

The course consists of eighteen men who, taking it for credit, are doing all the required work, and in addition a varying number of

¹ Read before the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 29, 1912.

visitors, who attend the lectures and do what additional work they can. In addition to the weekly class-meeting, there are occasional conferences.

It is inevitable that the first year's work in such a course should be more or less experimental, and that a report made so early in the year must, to a certain extent, indulge in the "liberty of prophesying." With these allowances I shall try to outline our plan.

First of all, the course is one in English composition rather more than in methods of teaching. It is felt that the chief requisite for success in teaching Freshmen to write is to be able to write everything that a Freshman would be required to write, and to do it enough better than a Freshman can be expected to do it to make everybody concerned feel that the instructor belongs behind the desk and not down among the beginners on the benches. Accordingly, although it is our purpose not to neglect methods, we feel that if anything must be slighted it should not be the problem of teaching graduate students to wish to write well and to know how to write well. In planning written work for the students in English 67, the main purpose is to see that the impulse to write is, so far as possible, a genuine one; that is, that it comes either from some outside interest, or from some other course than one in English composition. Accordingly, the men are urged to do all their theses and reports for other courses with more care than is, unfortunately, always required, and to send them to their regular destination by way of English 67. The results have, so far, been decidedly good. Short reports, theses of fifty pages or more, and even rough drafts of theses for the Doctor's degree itself are being submitted in the form of outline plans or short trial chapters, and are being composed with an eye to more exacting standards of structure and of diction than this particular group of men had previously felt the necessity of meeting. In addition, theses and reports written in previous years have, in many cases, been taken down from the shelves, more or less thoroughly rewritten, and then handed in for criticism. In several cases, however, it has been found that other courses provide little or no opportunity for written work. In these cases enough work has to be prescribed to test the student's ability to direct the various kinds of writing commonly

included in the work of the Freshman year. The eagerness with which the men in English 67 have chosen this opportunity for additional practice and criticism has been very gratifying. At the same time, nothing could be clearer than that some of these really excellent graduate students write in a way that barely escapes being discreditable, and that few of them write with any real charm or distinction. It already seems plain, therefore, that a course such as the one that I am attempting to describe ought to devote about half of its time and energy to teaching the men in it how to write well themselves. As in any course in English composition, the great difficulty is to find time to read so much manuscript and to give the requisite amount of personal conference upon it. With a few more than the eighteen men in this year's class good results would be impossible.

The other half of the work in English 67 has to do with the difficult problem of teaching graduate students how to teach Freshmen to write. The principal means toward this end are, in addition to informal lectures in the classroom, three in number: (1) observation of actual work in English A;¹ (2) practice in correction of manuscript; (3) practice in instruction by conference and by class exercises. Let it again be explained that the methods thus far devised on the practical side of this course have been very imperfectly tested. So far, however, they seem to promise fairly well.

1. Observation of actual work in English A happens to be rendered easier by the nature of our quarters. Themes in English A, after having been corrected by the instructor, are sorted into compartments (one for each student in the course) in a large room fitted with tables and chairs. This theme-room is open to students, who are, in fact, expected to do there a considerable amount of

¹ English A is the course in English composition prescribed at Harvard College for all Freshmen who do not become exempt from it by passing a satisfactory advanced entrance examination. The class consists of about six hundred students, divided into five large sections, each of which is in turn divided into four small sections. Each week the men meet twice in small sections, and once in large sections. The small sections are in charge of instructors, of whom there are in all twelve; the larger groups are in charge of Professors Briggs, Hurlbut, and Greenough, who meet them in turn. The details of the work of English A are set forth in a printed outline called the *English A Manual of Instructions and Exercises*.

work in consulting dictionaries and other reserved books, and in copying their errors into their notebooks.¹ The arrangement of the compartments containing the themes is somewhat like a post-office, except that the boxes open toward the front.

To each man in English 67 are assigned ten Freshmen, who are in the same small section of English A, whose themes are in adjoining compartments in the theme-rack, and who may be assumed at any given stage of the year's work to be having exactly the same instruction and opportunities, but to be, of course, of different ability and industry as well as of somewhat unequal preparation. In his observation of the work of these ten men, the student in English 67 can hardly consider them as individuals because he does not know them individually. Considering them as a group, however, he is enabled to find out the prevalent errors of Freshmen, and to note the rate at which these errors can be eradicated. He is, secondly, enabled to know in advance how to plan classroom talks and exercises on profitable topics, what warnings to give as men approach various tasks, and what kind of response and improvement to expect. To keep in definite form the data resulting from his observation of the work of his ten students, each man in English 67 keeps an English composition notebook precisely like that of the Freshmen in English A, except that it is a composite notebook for ten men instead of for one, and is kept on the principle that the student in English 67 knows better than to commit the fault that he records. Accordingly, the notebook merely shows, let us say, that in the themes of the ten men in question there were, during October, one hundred cases of sentences lacking in unity, twenty cases in which the word *similar* was misspelled, forty-five cases in which restrictive relative clauses were wrongly punctuated, and so on. From a mass of such details as these, properly tabulated, a man in English 67 can tell that during October, for example, the

¹ The English composition notebook is an attempt to enable the student so to arrange the notes which he takes in the classroom, or which he makes from books prescribed to be read, that, properly illustrated, they will form a kind of textbook of rhetoric. To make them properly illustrated, the student is required to copy into his notebook, under the proper heading, such faults in his themes as his instructor designates. Further details in regard to the use of the notebook will be found in the preface to the notebook, and especially in Section 21 of the *English A Manual of Instructions and Exercises*.

prevalent faults of Freshmen are incoherence, lack of unity in sentences and paragraphs, ignorance of certain rules of punctuation, repeated misspelling of certain words, and so on. Any experienced teacher would know in advance that these faults would be committed, and would be able to forewarn his men against them; but a person who has never taught does not know, and cannot shape his classroom work accordingly. It is, therefore, a great advantage to students in English 67 to summarize the errors of a typical group of students, and thus, carrying their notebooks with them, to go out to their teaching with a kind of diary by the use of which they can ward off, through advice and explanation given in advance, a very considerable number of typical errors.

Another test of this observation of actual work, in addition to the notebook, is a series of brief monthly reports summarizing the work of the ten Freshmen for whom each student is responsible. In these reports a special point is made of noting the actual progress of the men since the last report. By making such reports, students acquire some rather valuable information in regard to the rate of improvement that can be expected of Freshmen, and in regard to the necessity of occasional reviews.

2. Practice in the criticism of manuscript, which is certainly essential to the equipment of the prospective teacher of Freshmen, takes, in English 67, two forms: first, criticism of the writing done by other men in English 67; second, criticism of themes written by Freshmen. As for the first, little need be said except that, as in any advanced course, good results are obtained by the exchange of themes, and the criticism of them by oral or written comment. As regards the criticism of themes actually written by Freshmen, much may be said, for here we have a kind of practice which is very difficult to furnish and yet absolutely essential. It is obvious that Freshmen are entitled to have their themes read wholly by persons who have received an official appointment from the university. The complaint is almost universal that, particularly in large universities, the quality of instruction in elementary courses is not as high as it should be, and for this complaint there is certainly some basis. One cannot, therefore, add to the grievances of the Freshmen by distributing in such a course as English 67 the

uncorrected themes of students in such a course as English A; nor can one effectively use themes in English 67 which the assistant in English A has already marked and graded, for it would be almost impossible for men in English 67 to be uninfluenced by the comment of the previous reader. If the comments were poor, what ought to be a criticism of the theme would naturally take the form of a criticism of the previous criticism; if the comments were final, the student in English 67 would find himself with little or nothing to say. We are, therefore, trying the experiment of taking typical themes actually written in English A, and of having a sufficient number of copies printed to supply each member of English 67. In printing the themes, all errors are, of course, reproduced. These printed themes are then treated by the men in English 67 exactly as if they were written themes—that is, allowing for the work about the same time that one would have under service conditions, the printed themes are marked with specific corrections inside and a general comment on the outside, and they are also graded. Much of this work is done in the classroom, where it has been found of great advantage to have all the men supplied with the same theme. The discussion of standards of grading and of the most useful form of comment upon particular faults which has been made possible by the use of these printed themes has been very profitable. In the course of the year, at least twenty-five of these themes, some long and some short, will be used. The expense is considerable, but is minimized by having enough copies made to serve for several years.

Practice in instruction by conference and by class exercises is extremely difficult to give, yet it is desirable to do something at it, although the conditions hardly approximate actual conditions. It is entirely practicable to have students in English 67 visit actual classes and observe the methods of experienced instructors; and this is being done. It is also practicable to have students write out in full one or more specimen lectures adapted to Freshmen; and this is also being done. But the same scruple that prevents the use in English 67 of uncorrected themes in English A prevents also the use of classes and of individuals in English A as material for the student in English 67 to try his prentice hand upon in the way of lectures and conferences. Something can be accomplished,

however, by having men read to English 67 the specimen lectures which they have composed for the benefit of imaginary Freshmen. The effect is not bad, for men in English 67 are trying to listen to these lectures from the point of view of Freshmen, and at the close they comment upon the lecture as adapted to Freshmen needs. The nearest approach to actual practice in giving conferences that has so far been devised is the very imperfect one of having the student in English 67 go over with the instructor in charge of the course the themes of the ten men in English A whose work he is following. This, though only a moderately satisfactory arrangement, is much better than nothing.

The remainder of the work in English 67 is chiefly the work of the instructor, whose pleasant task it is to discuss in informal weekly meetings such matters as the high-school course in English; the setting, reading, and grading of entrance examinations in English; the problem of dividing large classes into sections, and of keeping the work of these sections parallel; the most useful treatment in class of the different kinds of composition; the relative emphasis which should be given to these different kinds of composition in the long themes and in the short themes; the books most suitable for outside reading, and the amount of outside reading that can most profitably be required; the selection and use of textbooks for Freshmen; the use of the notebook; the use of specimens of English composition; exercises in the use of reference books and other matters connected with the use of the college library; the problem of oral composition; the problem of co-operation with other courses to secure better written work; the question of fixing a standard in grading themes; and all the other problems, both of administration and of instruction, concerning which a candidate for an assistantship in Freshman composition ought to have some ideas, although he should be made to feel that those ideas, being somewhat local and theoretical, will necessarily have to be modified as soon as he finds himself in actual teaching.

DISCUSSION

M. LYLE SPENCER, Lawrence College: In adding my mite to the general discussion concerning the "Preparation of College Instructors in

English," it seems to me that I may be able to do the cause most good by calling attention to the present glaring need of courses for English instructors—not necessarily teachers' courses as we ordinarily know them, but courses for teachers, nevertheless. It seems almost sensation-loving for a man in the presence of representatives from so many leading American colleges and universities to speak of a glaring need of any kind of courses in English; but I am convinced that a specific need exists for courses for English teachers.

In proof of my statement that there is a glaring need of instruction for teachers of English, I may cite the present widespread dissatisfaction with the work of our college instructors—men who have been trained in the English courses as at present given. I may cite, among numerous other illustrations, the thousands of undergraduates whose love for literature has been destroyed, or else unawakened, by improperly trained teachers—instructors who have taught their students so-called, or would-be, scholarly facts about the great writers of the ages, but at the expense of an adequate appreciation of and love for these men and their works—with the result that Browning, Wordsworth, Addison, Jonson, Shakspeare, and the rest have been made bugbears in the school-room, never to be read again in after-years. I may cite, too, the almost universal dislike on the part of students for English composition. To 90 per cent of our college Freshmen, rhetoric is what an American Indian was to a Puritan: God might have made something more troublesome, but he didn't. And I may cite, lastly, the present critical, even hostile, attitude toward our department on the part of the business, journalistic, and publishing worlds.

There exists now, and there has existed for a long time, a growing dissatisfaction with the work of our college English teachers, a dissatisfaction which in its last analysis it seems fair to attribute to the improper training of these teachers—to the fact, in other words, that there has been heretofore little training offered specifically for the college instructor—the teacher. There has ever been, and is today, an abundance of advanced courses in English, but these courses are not outlined or planned for the teacher. Their governing purpose, consciously or unconsciously, is to train men in methods of investigation, in the working-out of problems connected with advanced, highly specialized English work. They are designed primarily for scholars, investigators, research students, not for teachers. Even the courses chosen—the general fields, I mean—are selected with the research student in mind. (It is possible, for instance, for an instructor to be sent out to teach college students, with nothing

more than a superficial training in the classics of literature, especially of modern literature. Yet modern literature is *the* field that the college instructor must always teach.)

And while teachers will necessarily, must necessarily, derive much profit from such research courses, the training that they get is not of the specific kind that will serve them best in teaching undergraduates in after-years. Indeed, such training often becomes a positive hindrance; for in the continued, deliberate search for bare facts and in the unemotional analysis of abstruse, linguistic problems in these classes, the teacher-to-be is taught to care too much for mere facts in men's lives, and not enough for their lives; too much for the technique of their poetry, and not enough for its artistic beauty; too much for the sources of their plays, and not enough for the lessons they contain. Yet it is the lives of the great writers, the artistic beauty of their poems, and the lessons of their dramas—this side of our English teaching that is of greatest educational value in the training of undergraduate students.

In composition this need for adequate training is even more glaring than in the language and literature courses. Hundreds of college instructors are sent out every year to teach, with some sort of advanced training in everything but composition. Even a year of Old English has been required. Yet the one course that practically every instructor is required to teach is composition. To me the most lamentable situation in English teaching is that of the young Ph.D. from some big university, trained in all the highly specialized knowledge of Shakspeare, mediaeval literature, Old English, Germanic and Romance philology, and the rest—able to trace a vowel- or consonant-sound, without an error, from Indo-European to modern English, but with no adequate idea at all of how to conduct a composition class. The only work in composition he ever had was back in his little college eight or ten years before. Most of that he has forgotten; and, besides, the methods taught him then are antiquated now. He himself cannot write readable English. His doctor's thesis was a conglomeration of Latinisms, Germanisms, sesquipedalian-worded sentences, and unrhretorical expressions. And when during his college course the head of his department took him to task for the unreadableness of his dissertation, he excused himself on the ground that he was thinking too much of *what* he was saying, and not enough of *how* he was saying it. But as a matter of fact he could not then, and he cannot now, write clear, forceful, graceful English. Yet that man is to teach the one fundamental course in the college curriculum

—composition. The one fundamental course, because students when they go out from college may get along without Latin or Greek or chemistry or the multitudes of other courses offered today, but the one absolute necessity always is composition. Yet that is the course taught by the man with no more training in the subject than what he is expected to give his students. No wonder the business world is voicing its disapproval of our present-day English work.

The reply is made, no doubt, in answer to my criticisms, that it is easy for an instructor without special training, but with any reasonable degree of ability, to outline and give independently a series of courses in undergraduate composition. The man speaks ignorantly who says it. The situation is actually this. During the years of his training for teaching the instructor-to-be has not only not been taught composition, but he has been led to regard the work as dull, uninteresting. He has been taught, if not by precept, certainly by example, that composition teaching is menial work, drudgery, a pursuit to be avoided. He has been taught to look forward to research work. The vision held before him has been that of scholarship. In his dreams he has seen himself the discoverer of the *ur-Hamlet*, of the lost version of *Love's Labour's Won*, or the other six books of the *Faerie Queen*—and the world rising up to call him blessed. Consequently he has looked forward to teaching anything but composition.

But when his last college day has closed and he is rudely awakened from his dreams, the only position open to him is in composition, into which he is compelled to go for the bare necessity of a living. There he finds himself unprepared for the work, with no interest in it, and with the courses looming before him as so much drudgery. And though after three or four years he may have managed to read up and outline a fairly good series of courses, by that time promotion will have come to him and he will have passed on with the plaudit, "Well done, good and faithful servant"—and the work in composition be given to another novice. And so through all the years the composition work continues in the hands of untrained men.

It is the calamity of our present-day composition teaching that our instructors are—the majority of them—not only without special training in their subject, but using the work merely as a stepping-stone for advancement. They do not expect to teach composition always; their interest is in other lines of work; and they either are only filling in, waiting for a man higher up—in Shakspeare or eighteenth-century literature or Middle English—to die, or else are teaching the subject

only until they can get an assistant who will take what is regarded by them as the menial work. What we need is to train men for composition teaching, and then to employ for our composition teachers only those trained men who expect to make it their profession.

Before I close, in order to make my position perfectly clear, let me state that I am not opposed to the individual courses at present offered for English students. My opposition is not to the training for scholarship, which has been, is, and always will be a necessity, but to the fact that too many of our English men are educated only for scholarship when they should have had some training for teaching. My opposition is not to the year of required Old English for all applicants for an advanced degree, but to the fact that the same students are not required to take a year each in composition and the classics of English literature.

It is my contention, therefore, that the college instructor in English is not alone to blame for the dissatisfaction he has caused—that he has not had adequate training. He has been taught to bow down and make his salaams to the English scholar, the man for whom the courses of instruction have all been planned; whereas this same college instructor is in reality the man most entitled to all the wealth of homage and of training (if wealth there be); for upon him devolves eventually the instruction of the thousands of boys and girls whose only chance to learn to know and love literature must come through him.

GEORGE MOREY MILLER, University of Cincinnati: There seem to be at least two interpretations of what we were to talk about this afternoon. Is it possible that we ourselves need some further instruction in composition? My own understanding was that we were to discuss the preparation of the composition teacher. The lateness of the hour and the fact that some things I had intended to say have already been said prevent me from doing more than to attempt to emphasize the necessity for some such course as Professor Greenough's paper outlines and to suggest one alternative and one addition to what he proposes.

In spite of all the agitation about English there is still dissatisfaction as to the results—dissatisfaction on our part and on the part of those who consume our product. The unsatisfactory results are not due primarily to a lack of unity in aims and methods. We are pretty well agreed as to what we want to accomplish and how we should like to do it. Most of us accept the democratic ideal of composition teaching—the expression of thought and feeling with clearness, accuracy, and a moderate degree of effectiveness and facility, but not necessarily with felicity, not with

elegance; and we believe that close personal touch between teacher and student lies at the foundation of all successful details of method. The causes of poor work are threefold. We all believe first, that, to a pretty large degree, the bad conditions surrounding our work—too many hours, too many students, too many themes for the individual teacher—that these are responsible for a good part of our poor results. May we not hope, however, that the work of Professor Hopkins' committee will help to cure these evil conditions? The other two evils, as I see the case, are poor individual teaching and poor co-operation between teachers. The cure for these last evils can be brought about, I believe, largely through a change in standards for the selection and promotion of college teachers, a change desirable in all departments but especially in composition. Mr. Spencer has not magnified the harmfulness of wrong standards unduly. Emphasis in the appointment and promotion of teachers of college composition should be placed upon the ability to teach, upon the teaching function, and not upon productive scholarship in literature or linguistics. To make these new standards workable, we must appropriate and adapt to our own use methods long since proved successful in institutions college men are proverbially prone to look down upon—the careful training of prospective teachers in normal schools, and the equally careful supervision of young teachers in the public schools. Good preliminary training ought to furnish us our tests for appointment and good supervision the tests for promotion.

The right standards for such training and supervision, and therefore for appointment and promotion, will be based upon the twofold function of the composition teacher—to arouse enthusiasm and to make that enthusiasm effective by criticism. The teacher must have enthusiasm for the subject itself, for the art of composition, for the effective communication of clear thought and definite feeling to others. That he has such enthusiasm he should be able to show by his own records in advanced composition classes, not by his comment upon Anglo-Saxon relative constructions or upon the Byronism of Byron. That he can make such enthusiasm effective by criticism he should be able to show in like manner by his record in courses, in this case in some such professional course as that outlined in Professor Greenough's paper. Such a professional course should furnish further tests of the candidate's enthusiasm for the art of composition, should give him, under expert criticism, practice in correction and practice in teaching. Here he should acquire certain definite conceptions of the fundamentals of Freshmen composition teaching. He must know what will allow a student to pass and what

should force him to fail, what may be expected of him at entrance, what should be done the first month, the first semester, or at any particular period of the course. He must be taught to use a uniform system of symbols for written correction so that his marginal comments will be constructive, not destructive and inhibitive. He should be tested and criticized in the exercise of tact and sympathy when in personal contact with a student. If such completely organized courses are not at once practicable everywhere, then I wish to offer an alternative. Part of their results can be attained through a carefully organized system of teaching fellowships in the graduate schools. Let graduate students in English understand once for all that they must in some form serve a rigid apprenticeship under criticism for the particular work they will have to do at the beginning of their careers as teachers, whatever their work may be ten or fifteen years later.

But such definite preparation before appointment is not sufficient. The duty of inspection, of supervision, of co-ordination by heads of departments and by those in charge of Freshman work should no longer be shirked. It has been the rule rather than the exception that such officials have acted as if the teaching neophyte needed no help, no direction. It is no infringement of academic freedom, or personal initiative, to see that the beginners actually practice what the apprenticeship courses tried to teach them, that they adjust their general principles and methods to local needs, and that in all large colleges they work in harmony with the other instructors in the course. Adequate supervision will not only secure better results in composition from the students, our first aim, but also furnish the only satisfactory tests for the promotion or the dismissal of the teacher.

What we need and must have, then, to secure the results we all desire in composition, is, first, careful preparation of prospective teachers before appointment by specific professional courses or by some system of teaching fellowships, and, second, equally careful supervision after appointment by the experts in charge of such work.